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Response Paper 4 –Kali, Krishna, and the Divide Between Appearance and Deeper Truth

David R. Kinsley’s *The Sword and the Flute* explores the origins of the Hindu gods Kali and Krishna as well as their rise to popularity. In this discourse, I will contrast the Hindu tradition’s emphasis on physical appearance (at least as presented by Kinsley in *The Sword and the Flute*) with its teachings that we should strive to transcend the trappings of the physical world to see what is beyond the surface and attain *moksha*.

In the first half of *The Sword and the Flute,* entitled “The Flute: Krishna’s Carnival of Joy”, Kinsley explores Hindu representations of Krishna, stressing his physical beauty by saying: “[an] obvious characteristic of he cowherd Krishna is his surpassing beauty. Beauty is not an attribute of Krishna alone. Many Indian gods are known for their beauty and grace” (23). Kinsley mentions that “even Krishna’s nails are worthy of comment and extolled in Vaishnava scripture”. He quotes Kaviraja who writes, “the white nails in the hands of the Lord are also like so many moons…and the nails of His feet are also like moons”. Further on, Khanda launches into something of a blason, writing “the Vaishnava adore the indescribable, lovely image of Krishna…his eyes are like lotuses; his face is as graceful as the autumnal full Moon; his lips are like *bimbas*; the row of his teeth shames the pearls…” (24). Going beyond sight, Kinsley also describes Krishna’s smell, charm, and humor even.

In contrast to Krishna, but in the same vein, Kinsley emphasizes Kali’s shocking, repulsive appearance throughout “The Sword: Kali, Mistress of Death”. He begins the section by quoting a description by Agamavagisa, which says “she is dark as a great cloud, clad in dark clothes. Her tongue is poised as if to lick. She has fearful teeth, sunken eyes…she wears a necklace of snakes…she has matted hair…she has a large belly…” (81). Once again, this extensive depiction of the goddess is an attempt to conjure a physical image to evoke certain feelings. Throughout the second portion of the book, Kinsley continually emphasizes the significance of Kali’s appearance.

Kinsley quotes the Bhagavad-Gita in which Krishna says to Arjuna: “For Me…there is nothing to be done in the three worlds whatsoever, nothing unattained to be attained; and yet I still continue in action” with reference to Krishna’s advice on how to act (73). This, among many other instances, show a Hindu prescription for detachment from the world and its trappings. In the Kali section of the book, Kinsley discusses the Hindu idea of man’s inability to see past his immediate reality as he fosters illusions of immortality while disregarding the fact that all is in flux and is impermanent. With these ideas in mind, it seems contradictory that one of the most important aspects of these gods is their physical appearance. Krishna’s beauty and the physical pleasure he constantly seeks during his youth as a cowherd do not align cleanly with his claims that he wants for nothing and his advice to act without attachment or worldly desire. Similarly, acclaimed poets and devotees of Kali, Ramaprasad and Ramakrishna in particular, continually focus on her outer appearance in their poetry. They do not write about Kinsley interpretation of Kali’s appearance, that it is a representation of the true nature of a world in ruin. Rather, Ramaprasad writes: “O Kali! Why dost Thou roam about nude? Art Thou not ashamed, Mother! Garb and ornaments Thou hast none; yet Thou pridest in being King’s daughter” (118). Interpretation of the Hindu tradition tends to focus on its message of action with detachment and transcending out world in search of higher truths but at times it seems as though the exemplary characters in Hinduism are often still very much caught up in earthly trappings (e.g. Rama at the end of the Ramayana).

To some degree, Kinsley addresses this conflict in the conclusion of *The Sword and the Flute*, writing: “Krishna and Kali, two of Hinduism’s most popular divine beings, seem to present us with two very different visions of the divine. Krishna reveals a world of transcendent joy and bliss…where sickness, old age, and death are not known. Kali’s terrifying appearance, on the other hand, call’s man’s attention to the realities of pain, suffering, and death” (151-152). He goes on to say “one is forced to acknowledge the apparently ambivalent nature of the divine in the Hindu tradition” (152). To Kinsley, Krishna’s life as a cowherd is not a model for how we humans should live. Rather, it is divine revelation that casts the gods in a light we may not be comfortable with. Similarly, Kali’s grotesque nature is meant to help us come to terms with the fact that the divine is not necessarily concerned with our social and cultural constructs. The emphasis on appearance simply facilitate the larger message which is supposed to help us come to know god.